

FRENCH EVA

BY KATHARINE FULLERTON GEROULD



HE real *dramatis personæ* are three (for Schneider was only a sign-post pointing): Follet, the remittance-man, Stires, and French Eva. Perhaps I should include

Ching Po—but I hate to. I was the man with his hands in his pockets who saw the thing steadily and saw it whole—to filch a windy phrase. I liked Stires, who had no social standing, even on Naapu, and disliked Follet, who had all the standing there was. Follet dined with magnates; and, believe me, the magnates of Naapu were a multicolored lot. A man might have been made by copra or by pearls—or by blackbirding. We were a plutocracy; which means that so long as a man had the house and the drinks, you asked no questions. The same rule holds—allowing for their dizzier sense of figures—in New York and Chicago. On the whole, I think we were more sensible. There is certainly more difference between good food and bad than between five millions and fifty (which, I take it, is a figure that buys immunity over here). I don't think any man's hospitality would have ranked him permanently on Naapu if his dinners had been uneatable. Though perhaps—to be frank—drinks counted more than food as a measuring-rod of aristocracy.

Well, Follet trained with the people who received consignments of champagne and good whiskey. And Stires did not. Anyhow, Stires was a temperance man: he took only one or two drinks a day, and seldom went beyond a modest gin-fizz. With the remarkable native punch, compounded secretly and by unknown ways, but purchasable, and much esteemed by the knowing, he never would have anything to do. Stires looked like a cowboy and was, in truth, a melancholy New Englander with a corner-grocery outlook on life, and a nasal utterance that made you think of a barrel of apples and a corn-cob pipe. He was a ship-chandler in a small

—a very small—way. Follet lived at the ramshackle hotel, owned by the ancient Dubois and managed, from roof to kitchen-midden, by Ching Po. French Eva dwelt alone in a thatched cottage built upon poles, and sold eggs and chickens and fish. The poultry she raised herself; for the fish, she was a middleman between fishermen and householders. As she owned a gramophone and one silk dress, it was clear that her business prospered. Even Ching Po bought eggs of her, though there was a nameless, uninterpreted hostility between them.

Let me give you, at once, the few facts I could gather about French Eva. There were rumors a-plenty, but most of them sifted down to a little residual malice. I confined my questionings to the respectable inhabitants of Naapu: they were a very small circle. At last, I got some sort of "line" on French Eva.

None within our ken fathered or mothered her. Old Dubois knew most about her, but old Dubois, a semi-paralyzed colossus, "doped" most of the time, kept his thick lips closed. "An excellent girl" was all that any one could wring from him. As she had begun life on Naapu by being *dame de comptoir* for him, he had some right to his judgment. She had eventually preferred independence, and had forsaken him; and if he still had no quarrel with her, that speaks loudly for her many virtues. Whether Dubois had sent for her originally, no one knew. His memory was clouded by opium, and you could get little out of him. Besides, by the time I arrived on Naapu, French Eva belonged to the landscape and to history. She was generally supposed to be pure French, and her accent supported the theory, though she was in a small way a linguist. Her English was as good as any one's—on Naapu, where we were by no means academic. She could speak the native tongue after a fashion, and her *bêche-de-mer* was at least fluent.

I had heard of the lady before I ever

saw her, and had wondered why Naapu chose to distinguish a female fish-vender—even if she had begun with old Dubois. As soon as I clapped eyes on her, I perceived her distinction, her “difference”—the reason for the frequent “Mam’selle.” She was, at first glimpse, unusual. To begin with, never was so white a face matched with hair and brows and eyes so black. In the ordinary pursuit of her business she wore her hair half loose, half braided, down her back; and it fell to her knees like a heavy crape veil. A bad simile, you will say; but there are no words to express the unrelieved blackness of her hair. There were no lights in it; no “reflets,” to use the French phrase. It might have been “treated” with ink. When, on rare occasions—not often, for the weight of it, as she freely explained, made her head ache—she put it up in coils, it was like a great mourning bonnet under which her white face seemed to shrink away. Her eyes were nearly as black as her hair. Her figure was very lovely, whether informing the loose native garment or laced into her silk dress.

You will say that I have painted for you a person who could not, by any possibility, be beautiful; and yet French Eva was beautiful. You got used to that dull curtain of her hair; it made Madame Maür’s lustrous raven locks look oily. It came to seem, after a time, all that hair should be. Her features were nearly perfect, from our finicking European point of view, and she grew in grace even while I, a newcomer, watched; for the effect of the tropic sun upon her skin was curious and lovely: it neither blotched nor reddened nor tanned her, but rather gilded her pallor, touching it with the faintest brown in the world. I must, in the interests of truth, mention one more fact. Mam’selle Eva was the sort of woman who has a direct effect on the opposite sex. Charm hardly expresses it; magnetism, rather, though that is a poor word. A man simply wanted to be near her. She intrigued you, she drew you on, she assailed your consciousness in indefinable ways—all without the sweep of an eyelash or the pout of a lip. French Eva was a good girl, and went her devious ways with reticent feet. But she was not in “society,” for she lived alone in a

thatched hut, and attended native festivals, and swore—when necessary—at the crews of trading barques. I am not sure that she did not, of all tongues possible to her, prefer *bêche-de-mer*; which is not, at its most innocent, an elegant language. She had no enemies except Ching Po—for reasons unknown; and she paid her occasional respects to any and all religions that Naapu boasted. When there was a row, she was always, of course, on the European side; though she would stretch a point now and then in favor of the native constabulary.

So much for French Eva—who was by no means so important in the Naapu scheme of things as my long description may imply. She had her eminently respectable, her perfectly recognized niche, and we all bought eggs and fish of her when we could. She was a curious figure, to be sure; but you must remember that on Naapu every one, nearly, was unaverage, if not abnormal. Even the agents and officials were apt to be the least promising of their kind—or they would have been somewhere else. It was a beautiful refuge for utter bounders and men who, though not bounders, had a very low limit of achievement. The jetsam of officialdom was washed up on that lonely, lovely shore. The magnates of Naapu were not to be trusted. Naapu was a rich island, the richest of its group; and, being off the main lines of traffic, was an excellent field for the unscrupulous. Tourists did not bother us, for tourists do not like eighty-ton schooners; maps did not particularly insist upon us; we were well known in places where it was profitable to know us, and not much talked about anywhere. Our copra was of the best; there were pearls to be had in certain waters if you could bribe or fight your way to them; and large groups of natives occasionally disappeared over night from one of the surrounding islands. Naapu was, you might say, the clasp of a necklace. How could we be expected to know what went on in the rest of the string—with one leaky patrol-boat to ride those seas? Sometimes there were fights down by the docks; strangers got arrested and were mysteriously pardoned out; there were always a good many people in the landscape who had had too much square-

face. We were very far away from everything, and in spite of all these drawbacks we were happy, because the climate was, most of the year, unexceptionable. When you recall what most civilized climates are like, "unexceptionable," that cold and formal word, may well take your breath away. Lest any one should suspect me of blackbirding or gin-selling, I will say at once that I had come to Naapu by accident and that I stayed because, for reasons that I will not go into here, I liked it. I lived in a tiny bungalow with an ex-ship's cook whom I called Joe, and several thousand cockroaches. I had hired Joe to cook for me, but his chief duty soon became to keep the cockroaches out of my bedroom. As a matter of fact, I usually dined at Dubois's hotel or at some private house.

Why so idle a person as I should have looked down—as I did, from the first—on Follet, I cannot explain. The money I lived on was certainly not of my own making. But, strictly speaking, I could have gone home if I had chosen, and I more than suspected that Follet could not have. Follet was not enamoured of Naapu, and talked grandiloquently of Melbourne and Batavia and Hong-Kong. He continued, however, to be a resident of the island, and none of his projects of removal to a better place ever went beyond mere frothy talk. He lived at Dubois's, but spent much of his time with the aforesaid magnates. He had an incorruptible manner; some grace that had been bred in him early never forsook him, and the ladies of Naapu liked him. Even good Madame Maür, who squinted, squinted more painfully at Follet than at any one else. But his idleness was beginning to tell on him; occasionally he had moody fits, and there were times when he broke out and ran amuck among beach-combers and tipsy natives along the water-front. More than once, Ching Po sought him out and fetched him home.

My first intimation of trouble came from Stires. I had nothing to do with this particular Yankee in the way of business, but I lingered occasionally by his door in the cool of the afternoon, just to feed my eyes on his brawn and my ears on his homely and pleasant nasality. Stires's eyes were that disconcerting gray-

blue which seems to prevail among men who have lived much in the desert or on the open sea. You find it in Arizona; and in the navies of all the northern countries. It added to his cowboy look. I knew nothing about Stires—remember that on Naapu we never asked a man questions about himself—but I liked him. He sat about on heaps of indescribable junk—things that go into the bowels of ships—and talked freely. And because Follet and I were both in what Naapu would have called its best circles, I never talked about Follet, though I liked him no better than Stires did. I say it began with Stires; but it began really with Schneider, introduced by Stires into our leisurely conversation. This is Schneider's only importance: namely, that, mixing himself up in French Eva's context, he made other men speak of her.

The less said about Schneider, the better; which means always that there is a great deal to say. In this case, there was perhaps less to say than to surmise. He did not give himself away—to us. Schneider had turned up on a trading schooner from Melbourne, was stopping at the hotel in one of the best rooms, and had a general interest in the potentialities of Naapu. I say potentialities advisedly, for he was not directly concerned, so far as I know, with any existing business there. He frequented everybody, and asked questions in the meticulous German way. He wandered all over the island—*islands*, I should say, for once or twice I saw him banging off in a creaky motor-boat to the other jewels of the necklace. Guesses as to his real business were free and frequent. He was a pearl-smuggler; the agent of a Queensland planter; a fugitive from justice; a mad scientist; a servant of the Imperial German Government. No one presumed to certitude—which was in itself a tribute to German efficiency. Schneider was blond and brush-haired and thick-lipped; he was unpleasant from the crown of his ill-shaped head to the soles of his ill-shaped shoes; but, though lacking in every charm, he was not sinister. He had seen curious places and amusing things, and could cap most adventures with something relevant; but his type and temperament prevented him from being a "good mixer," and he was not popular.

Stires, however, had his own grievance, and his judgment of Schneider went deep. He did not mind the shape of Schneider's skull, or the hint of goose-step in Schneider's gait; but he minded, very much, the kind of interest that Schneider took in French Eva. He told me that, straight, emphasizing his statements with a rusty spanner, which he wielded in a curious, classical way, like a trident. According to him, Schneider was bothering the life out of the girl. "Always asking her to dress up and come over to chow with him at the hō-tel." And the spanner went down as if Neptune were rebuking the seas.

"Does she go?"

"No."

"Well, then—can't you leave the lady to discourage him in her own way?"

"She won't go to the hō-tel, because she hates Ching Po. But she walks out with him Sunday afternoons. He gives her gimcracks."

"Then she likes him?"

"There's no telling. She's a real lady." And the discouraged Stires beat, with his spanner, a refrain to his involuntary epigram.

"She can take care of herself, can't she?" I had watched her deal with a drunken Solomon Islander, and did not see how Schneider could be a match for her.

"I don't know." Stires's lazy drawl challenged the sunset.

"Anything I can do?" I asked as I rose.

"Unless you go in and cut him out," he meditated with a grin.

"But I'm not in love with her," I protested.

"You might take her to church."

But I refused. Philandering was not my forte, and church, in any case, was the last thing I should venture to propose.

"Why don't you go in yourself?"

Stires scratched his head. The trident trailed upon the ground. "It's serious or nothing with me, I guess. And she's got something against me. I don't know what. Thinks I don't blarney the Kana-kas enough, perhaps. Then there's Follet."

"Oh, is he in it?" I forgot to go.

"He's more in it than I am, and I'm

darned if I know what she's up to with the three of us. I'm playing 'possum, till I find out."

"If you can stand Follet butting in, why can't you stand Schneider? Safety in numbers, you know."

"Well, Mr. Follet belongs here. I can have it out with him any time. He'll have to play the game. But if I know Schneider, there's no wedding bells in his. And Mam'selle Eva hasn't, as you might say, got a chaperon."

The spectacle of "Mam'selle Eva," as I had last seen her, perspiring, loosely girdled, buying a catch of fish at a fair price from three mercenary natives adorned with shark's-tooth necklaces, rose before me.

"Man alive, you don't have to chaperon her," I cried. "She's on to everything."

The sun-and-wind-whipt eyes flashed at me. The spanner trembled a little.

"Don't misunderstand me," I insisted. "But it stands to reason that, here on Naapu, she's learned a good many things they don't teach in little red schoolhouses. I have a great respect for her, and, between you and me, I shouldn't wonder if she had sized Schneider up already."

The eyes were appeased. "Maybe, maybe," he grunted. "But lies come easy to him, I guess. Miss Eva wouldn't be the first he'd fooled."

"Do you know anything about him?"

"Not a thing, except what sticks out all over him. For a man's eyes, that is. You never can tell what a woman will see."

I left him poking in the dust with his spanner.

I dined that night at Lockerbie's. There was no Mrs. Lockerbie, and it was a man's party. Follet was there, of course, and Schneider, too, his teeth and his clothes whiter than the rest of ours. I was surprised to see Schneider, for Lockerbie had suspected the Teuton of designs on his very privately and not too authentically owned lagoon. Lockerbie did a fair business in pearls; no great beauties or values among them, but a good marketable cheap product. But no one held out very long against any one on Naapu.

Schneider was drunk before he ever got

to Lockerbie's that night. It was part of the Naapu ritual not to drink just before you reached your host's house, and that ritual, it soon became evident, Schneider had not observed. I saw Lockerbie scowl, and Follet wince, and some of the others stare. I could not help being amused, for I knew that no one would object to his being in that condition an hour later. The only point was that he should not have arrived like that. If Schneider had had anything resembling a skin, he would have felt about as comfortable as Mother Eve at a woman's club. Lockerbie's scowl was no joke; and Follet had a way of wriggling his backbone gracefully. . . . It was up to me to save Schneider, and I did. The honor of Naapu was nothing to me; and by dint of almost embracing him, I made myself a kind of absorbent for his worst breaks. It was not a pleasant hour for me before the rest began to loosen up.

In my eagerness to prevent Lockerbie from insulting his guest, I drank nothing, myself, after the first cocktail. So it came to pass that by the time I could safely leave Schneider to the others, I found myself unwontedly incarnating the spirit of criticism.

They were a motley crowd, coalesced for the moment into a vinous solidarity. Follet spat his words out very sweetly; his poisonous grace grew on him in his cups. Lockerbie, warmed by wine, was as simple—and charming—as a wart-hog. Old Maskell, who had seen wind-jammer days and ways and come very close, I suspected, to piracy, always prayed at least once. Pasquier, the successful merchant who imported finery for the ladies of Naapu, rolled out socialistic platitudes . . . he was always flanked, at the end of the feast, by two empty chairs. Little Morlot began the endless tale of his conquests in more civilized lands: all patchouli and hair-oil. Anything served as a cue for all of them to dive into the welter of their own preoccupations. Just because they knew each other and Naapu so well, they seemed free to wander at will in the secret recesses of their predilections and their memories. I felt like Circe—or perhaps Ulysses; save that I had none of that wise man's wisdom.

The reward of my abstinence, I found,

was to be the seeing home of Schneider. It would have come more naturally to Follet, who also lived at Dubois's, but Follet was fairly snarling at Schneider. French Eva's name had been mentioned. On my word, as I saw Follet curving his spinal column, and Schneider lighting up his face with his perfect teeth, I thought with an immense admiration of the unpolished and loose-hung Stires amid the eternal smell of tar and dust. It was a mere discussion of her hair, incoherent and pointless enough. No scandal, even from Schneider. There had been some sense, of a dirty sort, in his talk to me; but more wine had scattered his wits.

I took Schneider home, protesting to myself that I would never be so caught again. He lurched rather stiffly along, needing my help only when we crossed the unpaved roads in the darkness. Follet went ahead, and I gave him a good start. When we reached the hotel, Ching Po surged up out of the black veranda and crooked his arm for Schneider to lean upon. They passed into the building, silently, like old friends.

A stupid indisposition housed me for a little after Lockerbie's feast. I resented the discomfort of temporary illness, but rather liked being alone, and told Joe to refuse me to callers—even the Maürs, who were more like friends and neighbors than any one else in the place. My own affairs should not obtrude on this tale at all; and I will not go into them more than to say that I came to the end of my dosing and emerged upon the world after three days. The foolish thought came to me that I would have a look at French Eva's hair, of which little Morlot had spoken in such gallant hiccoughs.

The lady was not upon her veranda, nor yet in her poultry-yard, as I paced past her dwelling. I had got nearly by, when I heard myself addressed from the unglazed window.

"Monsieur!"

I strolled back, wondering if at last I should be invited to hear the gramophone—her chiefest treasure. The mass of hair spread out of the crude opening in the bamboo wall, for all the world like Rapunzel's. I faced a great curtain of black. Then hands appeared and made a rift in it, and a face showed in the loose black frame.

"Monsieur, what is the German for 'cochon'?"

My German is scanty, and I reflected. "Schweinhund" will do, I think," I answered after consideration.

"A thousand thanks." The face disappeared, and the hair was pulled after it.

I waited. I could hear nothing distinctly, but in a moment Schneider came running quickly and stiffly down the creaky ladder from the door. He saw me—of that I am sure—but I did not blame him for not greeting one who had doubtless been giving aid and comfort to the enemy. I squatted on the low railing of French Eva's compound, but she herself was not forthcoming. After ten minutes I heard a commotion in the poultry-yard, and found her at the back among her chickens. Her hair was piled up into an amazing structure: it looked as if some one had placed the great pyramid on top of the sphinx.

"Do you need my further services?"

She smiled. "Not in the least. But I like to speak to animals, when possible, in their own language. It saves time." By way of illustration, she clucked to a group of hens. She turned her back to me, and I was dismissed from her bare-foot presence.

Stires was my logical goal after that, and I found him busy with the second mate of a tramp just in from Papua and bound for the Carolines. After the man had gone, I informed Stires of the episode. For a man who had damned Schneider up and down for making presents to a lady, Stires reacted disappointingly.

"He got his, eh?" was all he said.

"Evidently. You don't seem to be much affected."

"So long as she's shipped him, that's all right," he drawled.

"I can't make out what your interest in the matter is," I suggested.

"Sure you can't." Stires began to whistle creakily, and took up some nameless object to repair.

"How long is Schneider staying round these parts?"

"Not long, I guess. I heard he was leaving on the Sydney packet next week."

"So you're only up against Follet?" I pressed him.

"I ain't up against anybody. Miss Eva'll settle her own affairs."

"Excuse me." And I made the gesture of withdrawing.

"Don't get het up under the collar," he protested. "Only I never did like this discussing ladies. She don't cotton to me for some reason. I'm free to say I admire her very much. I guess that's all."

"Nothing I can do for you, then?"

Stires lighted a pipe. "If you're so set on helping me, you might watch over Ching Po a little."

"What is he up to?"

"Don't know. But it ain't like him to be sitting round idle when there's harm to be done. He's got something up his sleeve—and a Chink's sleeve's big enough to hold a good-sized crime," he finished, with a grim essay of humor.

"Are these mere suspicions on your part, or do you know that something's up?"

"Most things happen on Naapu before there's been any time for suspicion," he rejoined, squinting at his pipe, which had stopped drawing. "These folks lie low and sing little songs, and just as you're dropping off there's a knife somewhere. . . . Have you heard anything about the doings up yonder?" He indicated the mountain that rose, sharply cut and chasmed, back of the town.

"Trouble with the natives? No."

"This is the time o' year when the heathen begin to feel their oats. Miss Eva, she's interested in their superstitions. They don't usually come to anything—just a little more work for the police if they get drunk and run amuck. The constabulary is mostly off on the spree. They have gods of wood and stone up in the caves yonder, you know. But it's always a kind of uneasy feel to things till they settle down again."

I leaned against a coil of rope and pursued the subject. "But none of the people you and I are interested in are concerned with native orgies. We are all what you might call agnostics."

"Speak for yourself, sir. I'm a Methodist. 'Tain't that they mix themselves up in the doings. But—well, you haven't lived through the merry month of May on Naapu. I tell you, this blessed island ain't big enough to hold all that froth

without everybody feeling it. Just because folks don't know what's going on up yonder, it kind of relaxes 'em. I don't say the Kanakas do anything they shouldn't, except get drunk, and joy-ride down waterfalls, and keep up an infernal tom-toming. But it sort of gets on your nerves. And I wouldn't call Naapu strait-laced, either. Everybody seems to feel called on to liquor up, this time o' year. If it isn't one pré-text it's another. Things folks have been kind of hesitating over, in the name of morals, they start out and perform, regardless. The authorities, they get worried because a Kanaka's spree lands him, like as not, in a black-bird. Mighty queer craft hang round at this season. There ain't supposed to be anything doing in these blessed islands that ain't aboveboard, but 'tishn't as though the place was run by Americans."

"And I am to watch Ching Po? Where does he come in?"

"I wish't I knew. He makes money out of it somehow. Dope, I suppose. Old man Dubois ain't his only customer, by a long shot."

"Ching Po isn't likely to go near French Eva, is he? They don't speak, I've noticed."

"No, they don't. But that Chink's little ways are apt to be indirect. She's afraid of him—afraid of the dust under her feet, as you might say."

Stires puffed meditatively at his pipe. Then a piratical-looking customer intervened, and I left.

Leisurely, all this, and not significant to the unpeeled eye. And then, within twenty-four hours of the time when I had left Stires, things began to happen. It was as if a tableau had suddenly decided to become a "movie." All those fixed types began to dash about and register the most inconvenient emotions. Let me set down a few facts diary fashion.

To begin with, when I got up the next morning, Joe had disappeared. No sign of breakfast, no smell of coffee. It was late for breakfast at Dubois's, and I started out to get my own. There were no eggs, and I sauntered over to French Eva's to purchase a few. The town looked queer to me as I walked its grassy streets. Only when I turned into the lane that led to French Eva's did I realize

why. It was swept clean of natives. There weren't any. Not a stevedore, not a fisherman, not a brown fruit-vender did I see.

French Eva greeted me impatiently. She was not doing business, evidently, for she wore her silk dress and white canvas shoes. Also, a hat. Her face was whiter than ever, and, just offhand, I should have said that something had shaken her. She would not let me in, but made me wait while she fetched the eggs. I took them away in a little basket of plaited palm-fronds, and walked through the compound as nonchalantly as I could, pretending that I had not seen what I knew I had seen—Ching Po's face within, a foot or two behind the window-opening. It startled me so much that I resolved to keep away from Stires: I wished to digest the phenomenon quite alone.

At ten o'clock, my breakfast over, I opened my door to a knock, and Follet's bloodshot eyes raked me eagerly. He came in with a rush, as if my hit-or-miss bungalow were sanctuary. I fancied he wanted a drink, but I did not offer him one. He sat down heavily—for all his lightness—like a man out of breath. I saw a pistol-butt sticking out of his pocket and narrowed my eyes upon him. Follet seldom looked me up in my own house, though we met frequently enough in all sorts of other places. It was full five minutes before he came to the point. Meanwhile I remarked on Joe's defection.

"Yes," he said, "the exodus has begun."

"Is there really anything in that?"

"What?" he asked sharply.

"Well—the exodus."

"Oh, yes. They do have some sort of shindy—not interesting to any one but a folk-lorist. Chiefly an excuse, I fancy, for drinking too much. Schneider says he's going to investigate. I rather wish they'd do him in."

"What have you got against him—except that he's an unpleasant person?"

By this roundabout way Follet had reached his point. "He's been trying to flirt with my lady-love."

"French Eva?"

"The same." His jauntiness was oppressive, dominated as it was by those perturbed and hungry eyes.

"Oh—" I meditated. But presently I decided. "Then why do you let Ching Po intrude upon her in her own house?"

"Ching Po?" He quivered all over as if about to spring up from his chair, but he did not actually rise. It was just a supple, snake-like play of his body—most unpleasant.

"I saw him there an hour ago—when I fetched my eggs. My cook's off, you see."

Still that play of muscles underneath the skin, for a moment or two. Then he relaxed, and his eyes grew dull. Follet was not, I fancy, what the insurance men call a good risk.

"She can take care of herself, I expect," he said. They all seemed surer of that than gentlemen in love are wont to be.

"She and Ching Po don't hit it off very well, I've noticed."

"No, they don't." He admitted it easily, as if he knew all about it.

"I wonder why." I had meant to keep my hands off the whole thing, but I could not escape the tension in the Naapu air. Those gods of wood and stone were not without power—of infection, at the least.

"Better not ask." He bit off the words and reached for a cigarette.

"Does any one know?"

"An old inhabitant can guess. But why she should be afraid of him—even the old inhabitant doesn't know. There's Dubois; but you might as well shriek at a corpse as ask Dubois anything."

"You don't think that I'd better go over and make sure that Ching Po isn't annoying her?"

Follet's lips drew back over his teeth in his peculiar smile. "If I had thought he could annoy her, I'd have been over there myself a short time ago. If he really annoyed French Eva any day, he'd be nothing but a neat pattern of perforations, and he knows it."

"Then what has the oldest inhabitant guessed as to the cause of the quarrel?" I persisted. Since I was in it—well, I hate talk that runs in circles.

"She hasn't honored me with her confidence. But, for a guess, I should say that in the happy time now past he had perhaps asked her to marry him. And—Naapu isn't Europe, but, you know, even here a lady might resent that."

"But why does she let him into her house?"

"That I can't tell you. But I can almost imagine being afraid of Ching Po myself."

"Why don't you settle it up, one way or the other?" I was a newcomer, you see.

Follet laughed and took another cigarette. "We do very well as we are, I think. And I expect to go to Auckland next year." His voice trailed off fatuously in a cloud of smoke, and I knew then just why I disliked him. The fibre was rotten. You couldn't even hang yourself with it.

I was destined to keep open house that day. Before Follet's last smoke-puff had quite slid through the open window, Madame Maür, who was perpetually in mourning, literally darkened my doorway. Seeing Follet, she became nervous—he did affect women, as I have said. What with her squint and her smile, she made a spectacle of herself before she panted out her staccato statement. Doctor Maür was away with a patient on the other side of the island; and French Eva had been wringing her hands unintelligibly on the Maürs' porch. She—Madame Maür—couldn't make out what the girl wanted.

Now, this was nothing to break in on me for; and Madame Maür, in spite of her squint and her smile, was both sensible and good—broke, moreover, to the ridiculous coincidences and unfathomable dramas of Naapu. Why hadn't she treated the girl for hysterics? But I gathered presently that there was one element in it that she couldn't bear. That element, it appeared, was Ching Po, perfectly motionless in the public road—no trespasser, therefore—watching. She had got Eva into the house to have her hysterics out in a darkened room. But Ching Po never stirred. Madame Maür thought he never would stir. She couldn't order him off the public thoroughfare, and there was no traffic for him to block. He was irreproachable and intolerable. After half an hour of it, she had run out across her back garden to ask my help. He must go away or she, too, would have hysterics. And Madame Maür covered the squint with a black-edged handkerchief. If he

would walk about, or whistle, or mop his yellow face, she wouldn't mind. But she was sure he hadn't so much as blinked, all that time. If a man could die standing up, she should think he was dead. She wished he were. If he stayed there all day—as he had a perfect right to do—she, Madame Maür, would have to be sent home to a *maison de santé*. . . . And she began to make guttural noises. As Félicité Maür had seen, in her time, things that no self-respecting *maison de santé* would stand for, I began to believe that I should have to do something. I rose reluctantly. I was about fed up with Ching Po, myself.

I helped Madame Maür out of her chair, and fetched my hat. Then I looked for Follet, to apologize for leaving him. I had neither seen nor heard him move, but he was waiting for us on the porch. He could be as noiseless on occasion as Ching Po.

"You'd better not come into this," I suggested; for there was no staying power, I felt, in Follet.

He seemed to shiver all over with irritation. "Oh, damn his yellow soul, I'll marry her!" He spat it out—with no sweetness, this time.

Madame Maür swung round to him like a needle to the pole. "You may save yourself the *corvée*. She won't have you. Not if any of the things she has been sobbing out are true. She loves the other man—down by the docks. *Your* compatriot." She indicated me. Her French was clear and clicking, with a slight provincial accent.

"Oh—" He breathed it out at great length, exhaling. Yet it sounded like a hiss. "Stires, eh?" And he looked at me.

I had been thinking, as we stood on the steps. "How am I to move Ching Po off?" I asked irritably. It had suddenly struck me that, inspired by Madame Maür, we were embarking on sheer idiocy.

"I'll move him," replied Follet with a curious intonation.

At that instant my eye lighted again on the pistol. "Not with that." I jerked my chin ever so slightly in the direction of his pocket.

"Oh, take it if you want it. Come on." He thrust the weapon into my innocent hand and began to pull at my bougainvil-

lea vine as if it were in his way. Some of the splendid petals fluttered about Madame Maür's head.

We reached the Maürs' front porch by a circuitous route—through the back garden and the house itself—and paused to admire the view. Yes, we looked for Ching Po as if we were tourists and he were Niagara.

"He hasn't moved yet." This was Madame Maür's triumphant whimper. Inarticulate noises somewhere near indicated that French Eva was still in sanctuary.

Follet grunted. Then he unleashed his supple body and was half-way to the gate in a single arrow flight. I followed, carrying the pistol still in my hand. My involuntary haste must have made me seem to brandish it. I heard a perfectly civilized scream from Madame Maür, receding into the background—which shows that I was, myself, acquiring full speed ahead. By the time Follet reached the gate, Ching Po moved. I saw Follet gaining on him, and then saw no more of them; for my feet, acting on some inspiration of their own which never had time to reach my brain, took a short cut to the water-front. I raced past French Eva's empty house, pounding my way through the gentle heat of May, to Stires's establishment. I hoped to cut them off. But Ching Po must have had a like inspiration, for when I was almost within sight of my goal—fifty rods ahead—the Chinaman emerged from a side lane between me and it. He was running like the wind. Follet was nowhere to be seen. Ching Po and I were the only mites on earth's surface. The whole population, apparently, had piously gone up the mountain in order to let us have our little drama out alone. I do not know how it struck Ching Po; but I felt very small on that swept and garnished scene.

I was winded; and with the hope of reaching Stires well dashed, my legs began to crumple. I sank down for a few seconds on the low wall of some one's compound. But I kept a keen eye out for Follet. I thought Stires could look out for himself, so long as it was just Ching Po. It was the triangular mix-up I was afraid of; even though I providentially had Follet's pistol. And, for that matter,

where was Follet? Had he given up the chase? Gone home for that drink, probably.

But in that I had done him injustice; for in a few moments he debouched from yet a third approach. Ching Po had evidently doubled, somehow, and baffled him.

I rose to meet him, and he slowed down to take me on. By this time the peaceful water-front had absorbed the Chinaman; and if Stires was at home, the two were face to face. I made this known to Follet.

"Give me back my pistol," he panted.

"Not on your life," I said, and jammed it well into my pocket.

"What in hell have you got to do with it?" he snarled.

"Stires is a friend of mine." I spoke with some difficulty, for though we were not running, we were hitting up a quick pace. Follet was all colors of the rainbow, and I looked for him to give out presently, but he kept on.

"Ching Po, too?" he sneered.

"Not a bit of it. But they won't stand for murder in open daylight—even *your* friends."

We were very near Stires's place by this time. There was no sign of any one in the yard; it was inhabited solely by the familiar rusty monsters of Stires's trade. As we drew up alongside, I looked through the window. Stires and Ching Po were within, and from the sibilant noise that stirred the peaceful air, I judged that Ching Po was talking. Their backs were turned to the outer world. I pushed open the door, and Follet and I entered.

For the first time I found myself greeted with open hostility by my fellow countryman. "What the devil are you doing here?" I was annoyed. The way they all dragged me in and then cursed me for being there! The Chinaman stood with his hands folded in his wicked sleeves, his eyes on the ground. In the semi-gloom of Stires's warehouse, his face looked like a mouldy orange. He was yellower even than his race permitted—outside and in.

"If I can't be of any service to you or Miss Eva, I should be only too glad to go home," I retorted.

"What about her?" asked Stires truculently. He advanced two steps towards me.

"I'm not looking for trouble—" It seemed to me just then that I hated Naa-pu as I had never hated any place in the world. "She's having hysterics up at Madame Maür's. I fancy that's why we're here. Your yellow friend there seems to have been responsible for the hysterics. This other gentleman and I"—I waved a hand at Follet, who stood, spent and silent, beside me—"resented it. We thought we would follow him up."

How much Ching Po understood of plain English, I do not know. One always conversed with him in the pidgin variety. But he certainly looked at peace with the world: much as the devil must have looked, gazing at Pompeii in the year 79.

"You can do your resenting somewhere else," snapped Stires. "Both of you."

"I go," murmured Ching Po. He stepped delicately towards the door.

"No, you don't!" Follet's foot shot out to trip him. But the Chinaman melted past the crude interruption.

"I go," he repeated, with ineffable sadness, from the threshold.

The thing was utterly beyond me. I stood stock-still. The two men, Follet and Stires, faced each other for an instant. Then Follet swung round and dashed after Ching Po. I saw him clutch the loose black sleeve and murmur in the flat ear.

Stires seemed to relent towards me now that Follet was gone. "Let 'em alone," he grunted. "The Chink won't do anything but tell him a few things. And like as not, he knows 'em already, the—" The word indicated his passionate opinion of Follet.

"I was called in by Madame Maür," I explained weakly. "Ching Po wouldn't leave the road in front of her compound. And—Miss Eva was inside, having hysterics. Ching Po had been with her earlier. Now you know all I know, and as I'm not wanted anywhere, I'll go. I assure you I'm very glad to."

I was not speaking the strictest truth, but I saw no reason to pour out Madame Maür's revelations just then upon Stires's heated soul. Nor would I pursue the subject of Follet.

Stires sank down on something that had once been an office-chair. Thence he

glowered at me. I had no mind to endure his misdirected anger, and I turned to go. But in the very instant of my turning from him I saw tragedy pierce through the mask of rage. The man was suffering; he could no longer hold his eyes and lips to the expression of anger. I spoke to him very gently.

"Has Miss Eva really anything to fear from that miserable Chinaman?"

Stires bowed his head on his hands. "Not a thing, now. He's done his damndest. It only took a minute for him to spit it out."

"Will he spit it out to Follet?"

"You bet he will. But I've got a kind of a hunch Follet knew all along."

"I'm sure he didn't—whatever it is."

"Well, he does by now. They must be nearly back to the hō-tel. I'm kind of busy this morning"—he waved his hand round that idle scene—"and I guess—"

"Certainly. I'm going now." I spared him the effort of polishing off his lie. The man wanted to be alone with his trouble, and that was a state of mind I understood only too well.

The circumstantial evidence I had before me as I walked back to my own house led inevitably to one verdict. I could almost reconstruct the ignoble pidgin-splutter in which Ching Po had told Stires, and was even now telling Follet. The wonder to me was that any one believed the miserable creature. Truth wouldn't be truth if it came from Ching Po. Yet if two men who were obviously prepossessed in the lady's favor were so easily to be convinced by his report, some old suspicions, some forgotten facts must have rushed out of the dark to foregather with it. French Eva had been afraid of the Chinaman; yet even Follet had pooh-poohed her fears; and her reputation was—or had been—well-nigh stainless on Naapu, which is, to say the least, a smudgy place. Still—there was only one road for reason to take, and in spite of these obstacles it wearily and doggedly took it.

Joe, of course, was still absent; and though I was never more in need of food, my larder was empty. I would not go to Dubois's and encounter Follet and Ching Po. Perhaps Madame Maür would give me a sandwich. I wanted desperately to have done with the whole sordid business;

and had there been food prepared for me at home, I think I should have barricaded myself there. But my hunger joined hands with a lurking curiosity. Between them they drove me to Madame Maür's.

The lady bustled about at once to supply my needs. Her husband was still away, and lunch there was not, in any proper sense. But she fed me with odd messes and endless cups of coffee. Hunger disappeared, leaving curiosity starkly apparent.

"How's Eva?" I asked.

Madame Maür pursed her lips. "She went away an hour ago."

"Home?"

The lady shrugged her shoulders. "It looked like it. I did not ask her. She would go—with many thanks, but with great resolution. . . . What has happened to you?" she went on smoothly.

I deliberated. Should I tell madame anything or should I not? I decided not to. "Ching Po went back to the hotel," I said. "I don't believe he meant to annoy you."

She let the subject drop loyally. And, indeed, with Ching Po and French Eva both out of the way, she had become quite normal again. Of course, if I would not let her question me, I could not in fairness question her. So we talked on idly, neither one, I dare say, quite sure of the other, and both ostensibly content to wait. Or she may have had reasons as strong as mine for wishing to forget the affair of the morning.

I grew soothed and oblivious. The thing receded. I was just thinking of going home when Follet appeared at the gate. Then I realized how futile had been our common reticence.

"Is Eva here?" he shouted before he reached us.

"She went home long ago." Madame Maür answered quietly, but I saw by her quick shiver that she had not been at peace, all this time.

"She's not there. The place is all shut up."

"Doesn't she usually attend these festivities up the hill?" I asked.

His look went through me like a dagger. "Not to-day, you fool!"

"Well, why worry about her?" It was I who put it calmly. Six hours be-

fore, I had not been calm; but now I looked back at that fever with contempt.

"She's been to Stires's," he went on; and I could see the words hurt him.

"Well, then, ask him."

"He was asleep. She left her beloved gramophone there. He found it when he waked."

"Her gramophone?" I ejaculated. "Where is Stires?"

"Looking for her—and hoping he won't find her, curse him!"

Follet took hold of me and drew me down the steps. "Come along," he said. Then he turned to Madame Maür. "Sorry, madame. This is urgent. We'll tell you all about it later."

Félicité Maür did not approve of Follet, but he could do no wrong when she was actually confronted with him. She took refuge in a shrug and went within.

When we were outside the gate, I stood still and faced Follet. "What did Ching Po tell you and Stires?"

"Don't you know?" Sheer surprise looked out at me from his eyes.

"Of course, I think I know. Do you really want to tear the place up, looking for her?"

"It's not that!" he shouted. "If it had been, every one would have known it long since. Ching Po got it out of old Dubois. I shook Dubois out of his opium long enough to confirm it. I had to threaten him. . . . Ching Po's a dirty beast, but, according to the old man, he told the truth. Ching Po did want to marry her once. She wouldn't, of course, and he's just been waiting to spike her guns. When he found out she really wanted that impossible Yankee, he said he'd tell. She had hysterics. He waited for her outside the Maürs', hoping, I suppose, it would work out another way. When we appeared, he decided to get his work in. He probably thought she had sent for us. And he was determined no one should stop him from telling. Now do you see? Come on." He pulled at my arm.

"In heaven's name, man, *what* did he tell?" I almost shrieked.

"Just the one thing you Yankees can't stand," Follet sneered. "A touch of the tar-brush. She wasn't altogether French, you see. Old Dubois knows her pedigree.

Her grandmother was a mulatto, over Penang way. She knew how Stires felt on the subject—a damn, dirty ship-chandler no self-respecting officer deals with——"

"None of that!" I said sharply. "He's a good man, Stires. A darned sight too good for the Naapu grafters. A darned sight too good to go native——" Then I stopped, for Follet was hardly himself, nor did I like the look of myself as a common scold.

We did not find Stires, and after an hour or two we gave up the search. By dusk, Follet had got to the breaking-point. He was jumpy. I took him back myself to the hotel, and pushed him viciously into Ching Po's arms. The expressionless Chinese face might have been a mask for all the virtues; and he received the shaking burden of Follet as meekly as a sister of charity.

I bought some tinned things for my dinner and took my way home. I should not, I felt sure, be interrupted, and I meant to turn in early. Madame Maür would be telling the tale to her husband; Follet would, of a certainty, be drunk; and Stires would be looking, I supposed, for French Eva. French Eva, I thought, would take some finding; but Stires was the best man for the job. It was certainly not my business to notify any one that night. So I chowed alone, out of the tins, and smoked a long time—alone—in the moonlight.

It was not Stires, after all, who found her, though he must have hunted the better part of that night. It was three days before she was washed ashore. She was discovered by a crew of fishermen whom she had often beaten down in the way of business. They brought her in from the remote cove, with loud lamentations and much pride. She must have rocked back and forth between the shore and the reef, for when they found her, her body was badly battered. From the cliff above, they said, she looked at first like a monstrous catch of seaweed on the sand. Her hair . . .

Follet had treated himself to a three days' drinking-bout, and only emerged, blanched and palsied, into a town filled with the clamor of her funeral. Stires had

shut up his junk-shop for a time and stayed strictly at home. I went to see him the day after they found her. His face was drawn and gloomy, but it was the face of a man in his right mind. I think his worst time was that hour after Follet had followed Ching Po out of his warehouse. He never told me just how things had stood between French Eva and him, but I am sure that he believed Ching Po at once, and that, from the moment Ching Po spoke, it was all over. It was no longer even real to him, so surely had his inborn prejudice worked. Stires was no Pierre Loti.

In decency we had to mention her. There was a great to-do about it in the town, and the tom-toms had mysteriously returned from the hillsides.

"I've been pretty cut up about it all," he admitted. "But there's no doubt it's for the best. As I look back on it, I see she never was comfortable in her mind. On and off, hot and cold—and I took it for flightiness. The light broke in on me, all of a sudden, when that dirty yellow rascal began to talk. But if you'll believe me, sir, I used to be jealous of Follet. Think of it, now." He began to whittle.

Evidently her ravings to Madame Maür had not yet come to his ears. Madame Maür was capable of holding her tongue; and there was a chance Follet might hold his. At all events, I would not tell Stires how seriously she had loved him. He was a very provincial person, and I think—considering her pedigree—it would have shocked him.

French Eva's celebrations are in some ways a mystery to me, but I am sure she knew what she wanted. I fancy she thought—but, as I say, I do not know—that the mode of her passing would at

least make all clear to Stires. Perhaps she hoped for tardy regrets on his part; an ex-post-facto decision that it didn't matter. The hot-and-cold business had probably been the poor girl's sense of honor working—though, naturally, she couldn't have known (on Naapu) the peculiar impregnability of Stires's prejudices. When you stop to think of it, Stires and his prejudices had no business in such a place, and nothing in earth or sky or sea could have foretold them to the population of that landscape. Perhaps when she let herself go, in the strong seas, she thought that he would be at heart her widower. Don't ask me. Whatever poor little posthumous success of the sort she may have hoped for, she at least paid for it heavily—and in advance. And, as you see, her ghost never got what her body had paid for. It is just as well: why should Stires have paid, all his life? But if you doubt the strength of her sincerity, let me tell you what every one on Naapu was perfectly aware of: she could swim like a Kanaka; and she must have let herself go on those familiar waters, against every instinct, like a piece of driftwood. Stires may have managed to blink that fact; but no one else did.

Lockerbie gave a dinner-party at the end of the week, and Follet got drunk quite early in the evening. He embarrassed every one (except me) by announcing thickly, at dessert, that he would have married French Eva if she hadn't drowned herself. I believed it no more the second time than I had believed it the first. Anyhow, she wouldn't have had him. Schneider left us during those days. We hardly noticed his departure. Ching Po still prospers. Except Stires, we are not squeamish on Naapu.



